

Council of Ontario Universities – Academic Colleague Report

Reporting period: May 2024 – April 2025

Over the course of the reporting period, Academic Colleagues met regularly (every two months for a 2.5 h evening meeting followed by a 3h meeting the following morning) to address a number of current topics relevant to Ontario universities, share updates from our respective universities, receive updates from COU (including from President Steve Orsini) and to prepare topics for discussion at Council meetings. On several occasions, invited guests joined a portion of our meetings to present some of their work on the topic selected by the Academic Colleagues as a focus for the meeting.

The topic of our May meeting, Safeguarding Research, was of great interest to the Colleagues. Professor Charmaine Dean (Vice-President, Research & International, University of Waterloo) and her colleague, Prof Justin Nankivell (Director, Research Security, University of Waterloo) shared an update on new federal policy Sensitive Technologies and Research Affiliations of Concern (STRAC) and presented some of their work on the development of a community of practice related to research security across most Ontario universities. They discussed the two lists: Sensitive technologies research areas (STRA – list of 11) and named researcher organization (NRO – list of 103 – including 85 from China (53 of which relate to military), 11 from Iran, 7 from Russia) and the understanding that the policy applied not only to corporate partnerships, but also to all research partnerships. Furthermore, there was discussion of attestation process for faculty. Some of the Colleagues had concerns about a growing culture of fear at their institutions. Other concerns raised related to finding alternative sources of funding, international graduate students (current and future) not feeling welcome, and researchers feeling unsupported. I was struck by some of the uncertainty described by some of the Colleagues as related discussions at UofT (including updates from Prof Leah Cowen, Vice-President, Research and Innovation, and Strategic Initiatives) were at more advanced stages with supports in place and being broadly communicated across divisions. On the second day of meetings, Colleagues were joined by Steve Orsini who provided Colleagues with a COU update which included information on Bill 166, provincial funding (including university requirements in order to be eligible for this funding), brief update on encampments and government advocacy related to wait times for mental health services and accommodations for students. I had previously presented information on UofT's same day counselling service for students to the Colleagues, an accomplishment all the more impressive given our large student numbers accessing such services. During the information sharing, themes related to the impact of budget cuts (e.g., programme closures, staff cuts, incentives for early retirement, hiring freezes), encampments and high turnover of senior administrators/executives were reported.

At our August meeting, we were joined by Dr. Glen Jones (Professor of Higher Education and Ontario Research Chair in Postsecondary Education Policy and Measurement, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto) who delivered a presentation on the Future of the Higher Education Sector. Prof Jones discussed universities initiatives and commitment to the TRC recommendations and the concern about this ‘unfinished’ work fading, with recognition that we are a long way away from decolonization of universities. He spoke of the creation of a new sector of self-governing Indigenous institutes (currently 9 in Ontario with expansion across the country) and expanding relationships between Indigenous and traditional institutions. Professor Jones also discussed international engagement and noted that numbers of partnerships and international publications have grown, while cautioning that increasing travel costs and the federal cap on international enrolment are negatively affecting some institutions. He also spoke about expanding credentials and described how micro-credentials are being used by some as solutions to a poorly understood and defined ‘skills gap’. Finally, he spoke about leadership and stability, noting evidence that the number of university presidents completing their initial term is decreasing with similar trends being noted with provosts and deans. Additionally, there continue to be concerns about issues of diversity in senior appointments. Colleagues continued the discussion by commenting on competition between colleges and universities, noting the need for differentiation but also the potential value in increasing collaboration (e.g., to increase efficiencies, to increase theory and application with access to specific technologies/practical experiences etc.). On the following morning, Steve Orsini spoke to the Colleagues about the Strategic Mandate Agreement (SMA 4). Due to funding constraints imposed by the provincial government, Steve also spoke of COU’s advocacy for implementation of the Blue Ribbon Panel recommendations, despite concerns of sustainability given the funding is time-limited (3 years). There was discussion of the need for solidarity in this moment, to increase investment in public universities. Between 2020 and 2024 there was a 12% increase in applicants (not applications) thanks, in part, to all the supports universities provide. That comes at a cost to universities. The demand for universities’ spaces is expected to grow through 2030. There continues to be a need for public discourse on the value of universities to help convince government to increase funding to the sector. Budget concerns and turnover in senior leadership were key themes raised during information sharing by the Colleagues. The issue of faculty burnout and potential relationship with pressures of budget cuts trickling down, was raised as a potential future topic of discussion amongst the Colleagues. Other ideas for future topics included strategies for advocacy for universities with public universities alignment with Human Rights code, Scarborough Charter alignment by universities, collegial governance and the United Nations Sustainability Development Goals in relation to universities.

In October, the Colleagues received an update from Steve Orsini and Krista Orendorff (VP Public Affairs) on the COU’s advocacy strategy leading into the next election. Presenter Orendorff highlighted that the strategy was designed to correspond with government decision making milestones, including the Fall Economic Statement, the Budget, and a potential early election. The strategy included: 1) advocacy, 2) stakeholder engagement, and 3) communications. Key messages shared included universities’ critical role in building Ontario’s workforce and the economy of the future by preparing graduates with the skills and experience required to support the province’s growing labor market demands. Also discussed was the universities success in graduating job-ready students, expressed by way of data from the Graduate Survey (MCU) showing that 95.1% of university graduates are employed within two

years of graduating, including employment in high demand areas. Another key message was making the link between investing in universities with investing in high-quality programs, services and resources students need to succeed in a rapidly changing market. The discussion following the presentation focused on advocating to the public, including parents, and types of messaging that would resonate with these audiences. The role of the Colleagues and faculty more generally in such advocacy was also discussed. On the second day of meetings, the Chief of Staff and Acting Corporate Secretary provided an update on key issues affecting the sector, noting the government is continuing the process of negotiating the SMA 4 agreements. There was also mention of the an additional 10% cut to international student study permits, as well as the inclusion of Masters and PhD programs in the cap. COU continues to advocate against this and for implementation of the Blue Ribbon Panel recommendations. COU staff also provided an update on the postsecondary accessibility standards, including that while the sector was still waiting to hear which of the 185 recommendations would make it into the final standard, work was already underway to categorize and share information across the sector to avoid duplication. Colleagues shared their experiences with accessibility in the classroom, and noted that accessibility was also a consideration for faculty as it can be labour-intensive for individual faculty to implement some of the accommodations. During the information sharing, many Colleagues discussed concerns and plans for attracting and retaining students, budget development and deficits, new programmes, and leadership searches.

In November, in preparation for the Council meeting, the Colleagues split into groups to discuss a narrative around the value of universities. Student-facing, parent-facing, community-facing and business-facing value propositions of universities were discussed. Key points emerging from conversations included: 1) the need to counteract populist messages about universities by highlighting their role in increasing productivity and GDP and in contributing to skills upgrading over the course of the careers of many Ontarians, 2) the view that student choice is a theme likely to resonate with parents, specifically that financial challenges facing universities are resulting in fewer choices being available to Ontario students, 3) the clear benefits that universities provide to businesses, from producing highly qualified personnel to creating inventions and intellectual property that result in commercialization, and 4) the importance of connecting to existing advocacy efforts and echoing existing messaging at both the institutional and COU levels. The Colleagues presented and elaborated on these four points during the Council meeting. In terms of the information sharing session, I was happy to share the increase in base funding to \$40K for PhD students among other updates, given the concerns raised about graduate student retention by some of the Colleagues. I also proudly shared updates on our Institutional task force on AI. (I noted others were interested in learning more from our related website.) Other issues shared included development of new academic/strategic plans, new student residences, increasing fiscal pressures due to budgetary constraints, high turnover in senior administrative positions and ongoing and upcoming collective bargaining. The Colleagues discussed potential topics moving forward, including: climate change, quality

assurance, impact of universities, accommodations with Ontario Human Rights Commission, collegial governance, Scarborough Charter and graduate education and supervision.

At the Colleague's February meeting we were pleased to welcome Prof Suzanne Curtin (Vice-Provost & Dean Graduate Studies and Postdoctoral Affairs, Brock University, Chair of Ontario Council of Graduate Studies (OCGS)) and Prof Ben Bradshaw (Assistant Vice-President Graduate Studies, Guelph, OCGS member) who delivered a presentation, sharing some exciting initiatives happening within graduate studies in Ontario along with some collective challenges. Key points included: the development of Principles of Graduate Student Supervision by OCGS, with accompanying resources to support the professional development opportunities for supervisors, the expansion of graduate degree pathways, including the recent creation of micro-credentials and stackable micro-programs as well as ongoing efforts to enable credit transfer between universities for micro-programs and to explore direct-entry PhD programs from undergraduate programs with off-ramps into Master's level degrees, work to streamline the Ontario Visiting Graduate Students Plan, allowing graduate students from one university to take courses at another at no additional cost to the student, with a no institutional fee pilot project in progress for 2024-2025, the recent expansion of applied Master's programs proposed by colleges, challenges associated funding and recruitment, the cap on international graduate students, and artificial intelligence, potential areas of collective advocacy such as the international student cap and enhancing support for the Ontario Graduate Scholarship, and lastly, the Lifelong Education and Development (LEAD) online course developed by Academic Colleagues Kim Hellemans (Carleton) and Alison Flynn (Ottawa) along with a team of faculty and students, aimed at empowering learnings with essential skills and knowledge for personal professional success. Once again, a number of shared themes were expressed by Colleagues during the information sharing. These included the development of new academic and strategic plans, continuing fiscal pressures due to budgetary constraints, changes in senior administrative positions and ongoing and upcoming collective bargaining. I also shared some of the advancements in graduate education at UofT, including several addressing the key points raised by the presenters. They were not surprised to hear of this work and acknowledged the contributions of UofT's Vice Provost, Graduate Research & Education, Dean, School of Graduate Studies, Prof Joshua Barker on the OCGS. Steve Orsini kindly delivered an update on the provincial attestation letter (PAL) allocation process for international students, the creation of two new working groups with the Ontario Centre for Innovation on Life Sciences and Critical Minerals and Battery Technology, and activities underway in preparation to escalate advocacy with the government following the provincial election.

At our April meetings, the Colleagues elected to have a discussion on impacts of US policies on academic activities at Ontario universities. To this end, Dr. Sarah Laframboise, Executive Director, Evidence for Democracy (E4D) delivered an interesting presentation starting with some background information on the founding of Evidence for Democracy (2012) and its mission as a "non-partisan, not-for-profit organization championing the integration of scientific evidence in

government decision-making.” Other items covered were: the current federal political landscape, major impacts of the Trump administration on Canadian research (examples included: cuts to funding for Canadian Researcher collaboration with US counterparts, threats to environmental protections, data censorship and loss of scientific integrity, restriction on international collaboration and talent flow, and weakening of public trust in science), Evidence 4 Democracy tracker, activities underway in other countries to recruit American researchers through relocating grants, fast-tracking of visas and direct recruitment, challenges within Canada that may limit its ability to benefit from a “brain gain” of American researchers such as its declining percentage of GDP expenditure on research and development, financial constraints in Ontario universities and international student caps, the EDI landscape with overall growing interest in the commitment to EDI within institutions but some signals of waning interest at the federal level and finally, the results of polling which show that Canadians are very supportive of science and research, with 90% of Canadians supporting investments in research even without immediate benefits. Colleagues continued the discussion raising concerns about American promotion of a merit-based system spilling over into Canada, the importance of collecting evidence on the positive impacts of EDI across research and teaching activities as a pre-emptive measure, the reality that the US is Canada’s top source for research collaboration but the reverse is not the case and the concern about travel advisories impacting career opportunities. As a result of these discussions, the Colleagues brought forward the following topics to Council with examples from our discussion: Impact on research and researchers, Impacts on undergraduate teaching and training, Social impacts and lastly Recommitting to equity, diversity inclusion. Information sharing amongst the Colleagues included topics such as ongoing institutional reviews of the topics of equity and civil discourse, continuing fiscal pressures due to budgetary constraints, changes in senior administrative positions and ongoing/upcoming collective bargaining.

Given our continued discussions and COU’s strong advocacy demonstrating the positive impact of universities on society, for our May meeting I was delighted to welcome UofT Professor and Associate Vice-President, Research Barbara Fallon to deliver a presentation on the work that she and colleagues including, Professor and Associate Vice-President and Vice-Provost, Strategic Initiatives Timothy Chan and Assistant Vice President, International Engagement and Impact Gwen Burrows conducted related to “Promoting Impact Storytelling”. The presentation outlined the rationale for demonstrating impact (e.g., highlighting future payoff of current projects, showcasing contributions to communities, demonstrating the steps in the pathway to successful products or policies, advocacy for investment in higher education and providing a balanced representation of the university enterprise through qualitative narrative metrics into tracking and assessment tools). The pathway to impact included five steps: inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and finally impacts with the possibility, then, of describing progress for each step. Dr. Fallon described intentionality as being critical for communicating impact (both teaching and training impact as well as research impact), with its measurement being about theory of change for individual scholars. Several challenges related to advocating to the government were discussed with the Colleagues with advice for best practices including: engagement with

government throughout projects, exploring shared interests and joint knowledge creation, measuring and communicating small changes while contextualizing them within the broader programme and finally framing ongoing initiatives in terms of continuing a long legacy of impact. Importantly, resources to support staff and faculty develop skills for intentional impact storytelling were discussed with recognition of the need to exercise humility in coming to an understanding of how the public views universities and what it is that is valued by different ‘publics’. Colleagues also discussed thinking of communities as people-centred and not just market-centred when developing communications.

Finally, over the course of the year, the Colleagues enjoyed their interactions with Steve Orsini, which helped connect our conversations with COU’s advocacy for Ontario universities.

Colleagues also enjoyed the engagement with the Executive Heads during our Council meetings in response to topics raised by our group. I’m sorry to say that both my term on Academic Board and as the COU Academic Colleague for the University of Toronto will end on 30 June, 2025.

Serving as the University’s Academic Colleague, including two years as a co-chair of the Colleagues, has been a true privilege. I thank my fellow Colleagues and the fabulous COU staff for making this a most rewarding experience

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